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# MODERN ENGLISH GRAMMAR <sup>1</sup>

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A great many people seem to think that the study of grammar is a very dry subject indeed, but that it is extremely useful, assisting the pupils in writing and in speaking the language in question. Now I hold the exactly opposite view. I think that the study of grammar is really more or less useless, but that it is extremely fascinating. I don't think that the study of grammar, at least in the way in which grammar has been studied hitherto, has been of very material assistance to any one of the masters of English prose or poetry, but I think that there are a great many things in grammar that are interesting and that can be made interesting to any normal schoolboy or schoolgirl.

The chief thing is not to approach grammar from the side of logic or abstract definitions. What is wanted is to show that language is a living thing and what that means. When children begin to learn about cats and dogs they don't start with the definition of what a cat is or what a dog is, but they learn that this animal, which is very interesting to them, is a cat, and that this other animal, which is perhaps even more interesting to them, is a dog, and then perhaps after many years they will advance so far in their study of zoölogy that they would be asked in an examination the question, "How would you define a cat?" or "How would you define a dog?"—though I don't believe that even in the case of zoölogy you would think of asking that sort of question. Now, then, why should we start with definitions of nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and all these things? I don't see that there is any reason in that.

As I said, language should be considered as a living thing,

<sup>1</sup> A stenographic report of an *extempore* speech before the New England Association of Teachers of English.

or, rather, not as a thing, but as an activity, because that is really what language is. Language means speaking, and speaking means certain activities on the part of one man in order to be understood by other men. And what are these activities? Well, in the first place, of course, they are the activities of the organs of speech. Now, as grammar has generally been looked upon, these organs of speech play no part at all, or at any rate they are not the first thing to be mentioned. Grammar as usually taught is something dealing with printed words—not even written words, but printed words—whereas what we should deal with is the activity of man, the manner in which he shapes his lips and tongue, etc., in order to produce sounds which are capable of being heard by someone else and which are fit to convey thoughts and wishes and desires on the part of the speaker. This study of the first part of grammar can be made extremely interesting to boys and girls at a very early period. I know that from personal experience, and teachers of zoölogy and others, who really don't know much about language, also have told me that when they ask questions about such things as these, "How do you put your lips in order to produce such and such a sound?" "What do you do with your tongue?" etc., the attention of the children is aroused, and they find that they are able, without any difficult phonetic terms, to find out a good many things for themselves and to express them in their own way. I should take that as the basis of the study of the mother tongue or of any other tongue, and make everything as inductive as possible by making the pupils find out as much as possible for themselves. I think that there is a very fruitful field that has been very much neglected.

I am not, however, speaking so much about that, because that part of the subject has not been discussed today at all, but about the other parts of language—meaning, function, and form. What do I mean by looking upon those as parts of a living thing, a living activity? Well, there is a very good expression by Alexander Ellis that always has made a great impression on me. He says: "At last language study began, but unfor-

tunately it began with the wrong end; that is to say, it began with Sanskrit." Historical grammar began with the study of Sanskrit; it should have begun at the other end, and the other end is living individuals speaking and wanting to express their thoughts and feelings to their fellow-men. If we look upon language as an activity, and not as dead letters, we shall find a great many things of interest that have been neglected in the ordinary grammars. The subject is so vast that I shall only be able to touch upon a few things here.

There is one thing, I think, which any child could be made to understand, and which is very important; that is, the difference between formulas and free expressions, as I call them. Some things in language—in any language—are of the formula character; that is to say, no one can change anything in them. When you take such a phrase as "How do you do?" it is entirely different from a phrase like "I gave the boy a lump of sugar," or anything like that. In "How do you do?" everything is fixed. You cannot change it. You cannot even change the stress, saying "How *do* you do?" or make a pause between the words. It is one fixed formula, and has to be handled as such, unchanged. In the other case you have free expressions, which can be changed. Instead of "I gave the boy" you might say, "She gave the girl," etc. You may take any word out of these free expressions and substitute another one. And there the activity, the language-creating activity, of the individual comes in.

Any sentence except those that are fixed formulas the speaker has to create, at the moment when he is speaking, and in order to do that he utilizes certain types of thought that he has acquired from what he has heard before. The child hears a great many sentences of the same type, and then he creates new ones of the same type, even without knowing that he is creating anything at the moment that he is speaking. And this distinction pervades the whole field of language. In morphology or accidence we have on the one hand formulas, that is to say, forms that have been handed down by tradition, from generation to generation, and that are not created afresh,

because they are so fixed that no change is possible. Take irregular plurals, like "men" and "women." These are not created every time that they are used. On the other hand, we have regular formations by means of the ending "s," which can be added freely to any substantive for which we have no formular plural, thus also to all new words that come into the language. When the child says such a word as "sticks" or "automobiles" or "kodaks" for the first time no one can tell whether he has learned that form or whether it is something that he is just now creating on the analogy of other forms that he has heard.

Or take English compounds. There are some of these, like "husband" and a great many others, that are handed down traditionally and that are taken as wholes, but any man may make and, as a matter of fact, does make in every hour of his existence new compound terms, such as the "speed mania," "the trust bill," a "high grade neckwear," an "open-air class." And in that way I think we can explain a great many things so as to show that language is not in every respect something that is fixed and immutable, but that all these individual creations that have to be made every moment by the speakers tend, or may tend, to change the language. Those new forms that in historical grammars are called analogical formations have arisen in that way; but very often the same forms, the same expressions, that have been used a great many times before, are constantly re-created by speakers on the spur of the moment.

Or take such things as English stress. Here, too, we find that a great many words are handed down traditionally—we have traditional stress in them. But in many other cases people fashion the words at the very moment when they want them, and therefore they may very often change the stress according to such types of stress as are found in the language. Adjectives in the ending "-able" or "-ible" as a rule have the stress on the fourth syllable from the ending. This is due to the rhythmic principle that the vowel which is one syllable removed from the original French stress-syllable has secondary stress. Thus we have "déspicable," originally "despicáble," with a strong stress

on “a,” and “cómparable,” “lámementable,” “préferable,” “considérable,” etc. In some of these, but not in all, the stress is on the same syllable as in the word from which the word is derived. But very often a speaker would be simply thinking of the verb and then add the ending “-able,” and that would lead to a different accentuation. Thus we often see two conflicting pronunciations: “*acceptable*”—the old rhythmic form, is found in Shakespeare and other poets and is still used in the reading of the Prayerbook, but generally the word is pronounced “*accéptable*”; we have “*réfutable*” and more commonly, “*refútable*”; “*respectable*” formerly, but now always “*respéctable*.” Shakespeare and Spenser have “*détestable*,” but that has been supplanted by “*detéstable*,” which is Milton’s form. In the case of “*admirable*,” the new form, “*admírabable*,” has been less successful in supplanting the old “*ádmirable*,” but in a great many adjectives, analogy, that is to say, free formation, has prevailed entirely—“*agrééable*,” “*depiórible*,” “*remárkable*,” “*irrésistible*,” etc. That is just one instance to show that not everything is fixed. I think such instances as these might be taken from various parts of grammar to show the pupils that English is living, and not consisting of a set of fixed rules, handed down and immutable forever.

In any part of grammar I think the first thing would be to make the pupil find out for himself some facts about his own language. Ask him how in English the distinction is made between one or more, and let him find out some instances himself. Take words like “*table*”—if there is more than one table you say “*tables*.” Then I should ask him to classify the endings or various changes found to express “more than one.” He would notice “*oxen*” without being able to find any other instance of that ending; but then he finds “*children*,” and he sees that beside the ending we have a distinction in pronunciation between “*child*” and “*children*.” I think he will be able in many ways to classify these things for himself, and he will do that without having learned any definition of plural or singular, or any definition of the noun or the adjective, or anything like that.

Then you may go on, I think, to say, "Well, now take 'man' and 'men' and 'woman' and 'women,' and add 'old': 'old man' and 'old woman,' 'old men' and 'old women.' Is there any difference there in the form of 'old'?" The pupil will easily find out for himself that there is none. And we may go on like that through various parts, and make him find out that we say "he goes," but "we go." Then you will ask him what is that distinction. He will find out that it is the distinction between the verb in the singular and the verb in the plural. And then you will say, "Is it always like that? Do we always add 's' to the singular?" And he will find out that if we say "I go" or "you go" there is no such "s," and that in "I went" and "we went" the verbal form is identical.

I think a great many of these things can be worked out inductively at a very early age, and that they will interest the children much more than definitions of parts of speech, etc.—definitions which, by the way, are always imperfect and will vary from one book to another, because even the authors of the best textbooks cannot define these things.

One of the speakers said that it was easy to make a child understand such a definition as this: "A noun is a name." I was very glad to hear one of the other speakers say that this is a very bad definition, because all the verbs also are names—the names of activities or states, etc.—just as well as nouns are. This shows that we should be careful not to give too vague definitions. Some definitions really tend to confuse the minds of the pupils.

No one can really define what a substantive is or what a verb is, in a satisfactory manner, and too much work has been wasted, I think, in writing textbooks and in teaching from textbooks which lay great stress on such valueless definitions. The essential thing is to find out the facts of the language, the forms used to express such and such a thing; and then you may compare these forms with the means of expression found in other languages.

If the pupil knows anything about German or Latin he may of course compare the manner of forming the plural there with

the manner of forming the plural in English, and he will find out that the rules in English are much easier and simpler than those found either in German or in Latin. Then you may tell him something about the earlier stages of English, without teaching him Anglo-Saxon grammar. Just tell him that formerly the system of English inflection was much more complicated than it is now; give him a few examples of older forms, and point out that some words have retained traces of this more complicated system—for example, in the very forms that the pupil has found out for himself as being irregular, such as “men,” “women,” “oxen,” “children.” He will now be prepared for such a question as this: “Why do you think that just these words, and not other words, are irregularly inflected? Why should it be like that?” The pupil will see that these words are the most ordinary words, the words in most common use, that come up much more frequently than the plural of “kodak” or “automobile” or “association,” etc. He will easily understand that the child in acquiring his mother tongue will hear these irregular forms much more often and at a much earlier age than the plurals of such words as “oak” or “book” or “friend,” and that that is one of the reasons why they are kept up so faithfully from generation to generation, while less frequently used words cannot easily retain irregularities. “Oak” “book,” “friend” formerly had irregular plurals, but are now regular. I think a great many such things can be made intelligible to the pupil, and will prove immensely interesting to him, and also fruitful for him, not exactly for his expression in English—I don’t think that that would be improved very much by that study—but for his general understanding of the world in which he is living; because, after all, human speech is an extremely important factor in the life of us all. I don’t lay much stress on terminology, and I think that most of those things in grammar that require a learned term to be taught are of no value at all. They will not help the pupil to understand the wonderful mechanism that he has in his own language.

Word order is another subject that may be treated with advantage. In many cases word order is fixed; then we have



a sort of formula. But in many other cases word order is to be determined in each particular case by the speaker himself. He may arrange his words in one order or in another. He may take the indication of time first and the subject afterward, or he may take the indication of time after the subject, or even after the verb. It will be easy to show that sometimes the arrangement is made quite mechanically, but that in other cases the individuality of the speaker comes into account, and especially his individual needs at every moment. Why does he sometimes place the indication of time first, and sometimes at the end of the sentence? An intelligent pupil will be able to discover that sometimes one thing is more important to what has to be said than at other times, and that therefore some things will in one sentence be placed first and in other sentences be expressed as a kind of afterthought because the speaker after having told about something comes to think that it will be important also to indicate at what time it happened.

The next step will be to show that word order very often is expressive. Sometimes the change is only one of style if you shift the position of some particular word; in other cases it would change the whole meaning, and is thus seen to be a grammatical device, as when "John beats Peter" means something different from "Peter beats John." Some things about the relation between various linguistic means, such as case forms, stress, word order, and the passive construction, may be brought into play, I think, very intelligibly to even those 96 per cent of the pupils who are spoken of as never entering college.

Why not show also how some of the grammatical means used in our language are at times insufficient? In most cases when we add an "s" to a substantive it shows either the genitive case or the plural; but if we have to express the genitive of the plural, how then? The pupil will find out that he has only the same "s" to express that. But then you may call his attention to the fact that because such a form as "prince's," "the prince's carriage," is ambiguous in the spoken language—that is it might be taken either as a singular or as the plural (prince's or princes')—there is a great tendency to use the periphrastic

form in the plural (the carriage of the princes). But you need not use the word "periphrastic." And you might, I think, go through whole volumes of English literature without finding more than one or two genitive plurals in "s." So here the very simple system of expressing the plural and the genitive by means of the ending "s" is sometimes deficient and has to be supplemented by other means.

Or take the distinction in word order between "I had it made" and "I had made it." This too is in most cases efficient enough, but in some cases it breaks down. The distinction is made by the position of the object, but if one has to place the object first, as when it is a relative or an interrogative pronoun, we seem to have no distinction between "the shoes which I had made" in one and in the other sense. But I think that the pupil may be led to discover that there is really a means of indicating that distinction, namely, stress—"had" being totally unstressed and run together with "I" in the second signification, but not in the first. There are a great many neat little things of that order, which are scarcely ever mentioned in the usual grammars, because these are all more or less made on the pattern of dead languages known only from books, and therefore leave out much of what can be discovered by the ear only.

I think, then, that there are a great many things in English grammar that could be made interesting and that could be taught in such a way that the pupil himself would be active all the time in finding out interesting things that he uses in his own speech instinctively without knowing it. In a great many cases he may be made to see not only the fact, but also the reasons why it is so; and those other things in English grammar which he can't be made to understand in that way I think we had better let alone.

Now I should like to say just a few words about terminology, as that has been discussed here today. I was very sorry to hear that the English committee on terminology has decided to use such terms as accusative and dative cases in English, because I think it is entirely wrong. No case distinctions should be allowed except those that find an expression in form somewhere in the

English language. A case need not be formally distinguished in all words, but in order to be acknowledged as a case in English grammar it must exist as a separate form in the language; and accusatives and datives have no longer any such existence in the English language. There is no accusative, there is no dative, in English. Both these old forms have disappeared, as well as the old English instrumental. If we are to speak about a dative and an accusative I don't see why we should not speak about an instrumental and an ablative and a great many other cases. If we say "I go that way," why not call that a locative, and if we say "I shall leave this afternoon," why not speak of that as a temporal case? There is no end of cases in English if we admit the accusative and the dative which have disappeared from the English language.

Now, if we take the accusative and dative as one case, the question arises what to call it. The name "objective" has been found fault with because the case is not always used as the object. I do not think that that objection is really valid, because names must be taken from some function or other. In many cases I think we have to choose terms that say very little indeed, because it is quite impossible to find terms that will comprise everything or that will suggest a complete definition. We must take what is the most important function, and say that there are some things which are not exactly covered by that, in the same manner as we have in ordinary practical life a great many names of objects which are really inadequate and don't describe everything that might be predicated about the thing in question. The name "adverbial" was proposed, but I think that is just as faulty as "objective." It would tend to create some confusion with "adverb"; and then a noun or a substantive in that case of which we are speaking is not always adverbial. It is very often found, for instance, after a preposition. Hence, after all, I should prefer either the name "objective" or else the name "oblique." Such a term as "oblique" is really a very good expression, because the only thing that it shows is that the case is different from the nominative, and that is all that we want to know.

If I should give you some advice—I feel that I am very incompetent in advising English-speaking people about their own language, but if I were to give you some advice, I should put it in this form: Think always of your language as a living, spoken language, and as being essentially the activity of English speakers, in the first place; and then, in the second place, make your teaching of grammar as little abstract, as concrete as possible. Thereby I think you will gain two things: you will interest your pupils more, and you will really make them understand the subject better than by abstract talk, which will always be more or less pedantic.